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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: PRESIDENT OBAMAQS INTERVIEW WITH AL ARABIYA
AND LETTER TO
PRESIDENT ABDALLAHI

¶1. (U) The Obama Al Arabiya interview of January 26th garnered limited press coverage in Mauritania. One major daily, Nouakchott Info, ran a repeat of the interviewQs transcript while local websites and other papers, Arab and French, to our knowledge, did not carry or gave extremely limited coverage. State TV and radio, mouthpieces of the current military junta, ignored the interview entirely.

¶2. (U) On the other hand, local Arabic and French papers highlighted President Barack ObamaQs personal letter to President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (a response to his inauguration congratulatory letter) delivered on January 27th and the fact that junta-leader Abdel Aziz wrote a similar congratulatory letter to Obama that went unacknowledged. President Barack ObamaQs letter to President Abdallahi gained more attention in local media than his Al Arabiya interview.

¶3. (U) According to local staff, the Al Arabiya interview garnered little word of mouth impetus on the streets. Due to the recent events in Gaza, and increased attention towards Mauritania, Qatari owned Al Jazeera has gained a wider viewership and respectability from the Mauritanian audience than Saudi owned Al Arabiya. Unlike Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera has a radio station in Mauritania, and the publicQs perception is that it caters to an Arab/Muslim audience while the former accommodates Western viewers. Al Jazeera did not cover the Al Arabiya interview.

¶4. (U) On February 1st, PAO spoke with the editor of Nouakchott Info, Mohamed Khattat, a visitor to the US on the Edward Murrow Investigative Journalism program during the US Elections in November 2008. When asked why he covered ObamaQs Al Arabiya interview while his competitors did not he said, QI am now considered American. I cover American stories. We have done stories on Obama since the beginning and we continue.

¶5. (U) Comment: Post hosted a Digital Video Conference on January 28th with Professor of Political Science at the American University of Paris, Dr. Steven Ekovich, where the Al Arabiya interview was one subject among many during a lively debate between an audience of local journalists, politicians and alumni. While the lack of local media attention and analysis of this newsworthy event could be evidence of the regression in press liberty since the August 6th 2008 coup, it could also be due to Mauritanian navel gazing to the exclusion of international coverage and Al JazeeraQs relative monopoly on the Mauritanian media market.